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C O N F I D E N T I A L ANTANANARIVO 001136

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PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHER

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [MA](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: TEST-2 RETURNING EXILE RAISES TENSION IN MADAGASCAR

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY DCM GEORGE N. SIBLEY FOR REASONS 1.4
B AND D.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The planned return to Madagascar of an exiled political leader, Pierrot Rajaonarivelo, has the potential to trigger unrest in some parts of the country. Rajaonarivelo, a former Vice Prime Minister and the Secretary General of the AREMA Party, has been tried and sentenced in absentia for crimes arising in part from his role in the 2001-2002 crisis following the last presidential elections. He is expected to be arrested on his arrival if he returns -- as he has told his supporters he will -- on Saturday, October 7.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) With presidential elections set for December 3, 2006, the leading opposition AREMA Party has requested amnesty for its exiled leaders to return from France to Madagascar to contest the election. Rajaonarivelo has headed AREMA since 1997 when Didier Ratsiraka was elected president and was constitutionally required to relinquish his political post. Rajaonarivelo served as Vice Prime Minister in charge of Budget and Decentralization during Ratsiraka's term (1997-2002). Former President Ratsiraka is also in exile in France, but he is elderly and retains modest political support; Rajaonarivelo is the preferred AREMA candidate.

¶3. (SBU) President Ravalomanana has said publicly that the exiles are welcome to return, but must face the judicial consequences if they do so. In March 2003, Rajaonarivelo was tried and sentenced in absentia to 5 years imprisonment for complicity and abuse of power. After appeal the sentence was reduced to three years in May 2005, an outcome that has again been appealed by Rajaonarivelo's legal team. In a separate case, Rajaonarivelo was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor for embezzlement in August 2006; his legal team chose not to be present at this trial to preserve the right to protest the legality of the sentence. The government's position is that Rajaonarivelo should be jailed pending the outcome of his appeal; AREMA claims that the sentence was unjust and politically motivated, and that he should be free pending the outcome of the appeal in any case.

¶4. (C) AREMA scheduled a three-day national conference in the coastal city of Toamasina (also known by the French name Tamatave) for October 7-9. Our AREMA contacts report that Rajaonarivelo has left Paris and flown to the Indian Ocean island of Reunion on October 6, and that he will fly into Toamasina from Reunion on the afternoon of October 7. French Ambassador Le Roy called the Ambassador October 5 confirming this report. Our contacts in the Madagascar police tell us 500 troops have already been positioned in Toamasina and that a designated team has been instructed to meet the plane and arrest Rajaonarivelo on arrival. The arresting officer, who is known to us, is concerned that there may be a large crowd meeting Rajaonarivelo and that there might

be significant potential for violence if he carries out his orders. He has apparently told his superiors that he will not carry out these orders if the situation appears likely to spin out of control. Separately, President Ravalomanana's Chief of Staff (protect) has told us that if Rajaonarivelo is on board, the flight is likely to be diverted to Antananarivo to effect the arrest away from the AREMA supporters.

¶5. (C) Earlier this week Rajaonarivelo wrote to President Chirac seeking French intervention on his behalf with President Ravalomanana.

He reportedly mentioned the risk of imminent trouble and repression if he were arrested. In particular, he expressed concern that he could not prevent the "cotiers" (coastal inhabitants) from seeking revenge against the Merina (the dominant ethnic group on the high plateau).

Several AREMA sympathizing newspapers have published paid full-page advertisements in advance of Rajaonarivelo's expected return. In them Rajaonarivelo requests, in a lightly veiled threat, that the military forces stand aside, "the blood of the Malagasy people should not be shed with your weapon." The paid ad also states: "In fact, if there is no freedom, it would be impossible to meet the hopes of the U.S. Embassy for a free and fair election." Many of our Malagasy contacts, disputing the French Ambassador's public claims of neutrality, believe the French Government is covertly supporting Rajaonarivelo in his effort to oust President Ravalomanana.

¶6. (SBU) The Emergency Action Committee met to discuss the potential for violence over the weekend and the Consular Section is preparing a warden message (Septel).

¶7. (C) COMMENT. Politically, President Ravalomanana's popularity has declined since the 2001 election, but the AREMA Party's base of support, due to its own poor record when governing, is weaker still. Rajaonarivelo and AREMA have raised the stakes irresponsibly by playing the ethnic card. Tensions between the coastal and highland people in Madagascar have a long history and playing on this division, if successful, risks turning a political contest into a quasi-ethnic conflict. END COMMENT.

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